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TURNER, KERMIT STEVE. Contracts. (1974) Directed by: Mr. Fred Davis Chappell. Pp. 72.

This thesis consists of four short stories that are related in subject matter and theme. Each of the stories presents a young person of rural or small-town Southern background struggling to come to grips with new experience and new values in the larger world of the mid-twentieth century. The first story, "Sunday Service," presents a teenage boy who, through exposure to unwholesome influences, is led into dishonesty. In the second story, "The Contract," another teenage boy suffers a moral defeat while working away from home for the summer. The protagonist of the third story, "In the Pines," is a country girl who, although she does not leave home, is brought to painful knowledge by outside forces that impinge upon her life. In "The Deserter," a somewhat older, more mature young man and his wife return to his parents' farm after several years' absence; during their stay the young man struggles to understand his past relationships with his parents and to accept his present life. The protagonist of each of these stories makes, in some sense, a moral contract with the world and with himself.

CONTRACTS

by

Kermit Turner

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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SUNDAY SERVICE

When I opened the door I heard Julie Bright's voice, strident and heavy with sarcasm: "Yeah, you're a real bigshot. I sure am lucky to be married to such a big-time restaurateur and bootlegger." I went on in. She was standing beside the cash register, her elbows on the counter, that tough look on her face.

Walt was sitting on a stool across the counter, his back turned almost to her, looking out at the curb. He looked sheepish and nervous but at the same time he had an expectant, malicious gleam in his dark, sleepy eyes. As I walked past, he nodded, mumbled "hello" and gave me a sly grin. Julie Bright's glazed blue eyes flashed me a glance that was supposed to be proud and sexy. She was pretty nice when she was sober, which, unlike Walt, was most of the time, but drinking she was nasty and even violent. Walt was never violent; he always knew what he was doing, but he could be devious and methodically mean.

I went around the counter and behind the soda fountain to where we kept the towels and aprons and white jackets. I found a jacket my size, unfolded it and forced my arms through the stiff, starched-together sleeves. Then I went back through the swinging, saloon-type doors into the kitchen.

Joe, in his white hat and apron, was scrubbing the big grill with a block of pumice. He had the deep-fat fryers heating up and was about ready for business.

"Good afternoon, Robert," he said. Joe was always very formal and dignified. Everyone else called me Bobby. He was a big man, probably six-two, broad and round, but not flabby looking. His face was always red, and when he was drinking(which was most of the time) his nose flamed.

"Afternoon, Joe," I said. Then in a lower voice, "Looks like the Mister and Missus are at it again."

Joe looked down at me in all his dignity and tolerance. "Yes," he said, "I believe they have been quarrelling." He tried to avoid anything that sounded like gossip. I admired him for that and also because, although he drank heavily, he still took pride in his work and did it well. He had been chef, he said, in some of the best restaurants and hotels from Miami to Washington, D. C. It made his past seem glamorous, and I felt sorry that he had ended up here at a drive-in restaurant beside a drive-in theater outside a small town.

The Harvest Moon wasn't entirely a drive-in operation; we did have a small and rather nice diningroom, plus the counter with ten stools. The booths in the diningroom were covered in brown and tan imitation leather and were comfortable. Joe took great pride in the diningroom and was delighted when a party of four or six or more came in and ordered the best steaks or the seafood platters.

"How soon will you be ready for business, Joe?" I asked.

He didn't hesitate. "Ten minutes," he said, no about's or if's.

"Where's Mole?"

"Out back in the sun. Peeling potatoes. It was too cool for him in here."

It was mid October and although the afternoon sun was warm, the nights were chilly and in the shade it was cool all day. Mole was the potato peeler, dishwasher, and general cleanup man. He was a runt, mildly retarded and with a speech impediment; he stuttered and lisped at the same time. His head was small with a large nose, a pinched mouth, and little gray, red-rimmed eyes.

"You'd better go out and check the fountain," Joe said.

I went out and flipped up the chrome lids of the jars that held the syrups and fruits and chopped nuts for the sundaes and banana splits. I reached below the counter for a gallon can of chocolate syrup and poured some into the jar. Next I checked the syrup in the Pepsi and Coke dispensers. Then I opened the sliding stainless steel lids and took out the big ice container. As I started out back to the ice machine I glanced at Julie Bright. Still leaning on the counter, she was staring at the back of Walt's head as though she would like to throw something at it. Except for her glassy eyes, she looked pretty nice; makeup neat, dark hair fixed attractively, a little corsage pinned on the shoulder of her fresh white waitress dress.

When I came back with the pan full of ice, she was still staring and Walt was looking through the Sunday paper. I felt some sympathy for Julie even at her worst times; she had been a good-looking, high-spirited girl I was sure, and when she married Walt she must have expected something a lot better than to be working in a restaurant when she was forty or more.

Walt must have been a dashing, smooth-talking young blade when she met him. Must have been to have snared Julie Bright, because according

to her, she had been the belle of the county. But now he didn't care for anything except to have a few drinks and drift through the day. Of course, he still kept the business going and could get up enough energy to gamble. He took his gambling seriously and almost always won. And he still dressed neatly; his shirts and pants and sports jackets looked expensive, and his dark curly hair was always well groomed. But his body sagged from too much drink and inactivity. His stomach hung out, supported underneath by his belt, his eyes had dark heavy bags under them, and his chin was fat. The weight of his jowls seemed to pull the skin tight over his forehead and across his cheekbones. His expression and posture reminded me of Droopy in the cartoons.

"Robert," Joe called through the little service window, "you can open the blinds and hang out the open sign."

I went around the counter, opened the tan venetian blinds, and then went around the partition into the diningroom and did the same. The sun came in and showed up every speck of food and dust. I went behind the fountain, took a clean towel and wet it at the fountain sink, wiped off the counter and then went in and wiped off the tables.

When I came back to the counter, a car was pulling up out front. I reached below the counter for one of the paper caps, put it on, picked up an order pad and pencil and went out the front door. But the two men were already getting out of the car. They were friends, or at least acquaintances, of Walt's; I remembered one's name was Jake and the other's Albert. I held the door open for them.

"How you doin', boy?" Jake said. He was a big dark-haired, rough-looking man. Albert was smaller and wore a dark grey felt hat that I

had never seen him take off.

I followed them inside. Walt greeted them warmly, relieved to have something to get him away from Julie Bright. "Let's go in the dining-room and sit down," he said. I could see Julie Bright's glazed eyes shooting daggers at him; she wasn't going to let him get off this easily. She turned and went back to the kitchen.

I sat down at the counter and picked up Walt's Observer and opened it to the comics. Business was always slow on Sunday afternoons. We opened at 2:00 but usually we just sat around until about 5:00; then the young people on dates would start stopping for hamburgers and some older people would come inside for dinner.

Sitting at the counter in the sun I began to feel lazy and sleepy. I hadn't gotten up until almost noon, because we had stayed open until 2:30 Saturday night. My mother had stopped trying to get me up for church. She was pretty sensible about things like that: she thought I should go to church but she also knew I needed my rest. She thought a boy my age(I was a sophomore in high school) shouldn't be up so late, but she knew I needed the money — and, anyway, it was only on weekends. And she disapproved of Walt and Julie Bright Haskell and their bootlegging, but again she knew I needed the job, and she thought that with my good training I could withstand the bad influences that I would be exposed to.

My dad didn't say anything one way or the other; he was sometimes one of Walt's whiskey customers. Which angered my mother. In the first place, she didn't want him spending money on whiskey(four children in

the family), and she especially didn't want him putting money in the pockets of Walt and Julie Bright Haskell, who lived in a big brick house down the highway, drove an expensive car, and put on airs in general.

My browsing through the sports page was interrupted by a car horn. A jazzed up black '52 Ford with a fox tail on the radio aerial was on the curb. I put my cap back on and went out. It was a greasy looking guy with his bleached-blond girlfriend. I took their order for hamburgers, french fries, and cokes.

When I came back from serving their order, Julie Bright was back at the counter. I figured she had been having a drink in the back room. She still looked all right, though; her hair still in place, her makeup unsmeared.

"Well, how are you today, Bobby?" she asked, giving me the tough, seductive-looking smile she practiced when she had had a few drinks.

"Okay," I smiled. "You?"

"Oh I'm fine," she said. "Except that I'm mad as hell at that damn Walt."

I didn't ask why. One way she had of drawing Walt out, making him talk back and getting him into a quarrel, was to say things about him to other people. I didn't want to have any part in it. Still I sided with Julie Bright (for a long time I had called her Mrs. Haskell); I felt that she deserved something better than Walt. At times she was rather motherly toward me. I suspected that she had wanted to have children, but that Walt hadn't. Of course she told me things that my mother would never tell me. For instance, dirty jokes. I liked the joke-telling in a way,

but still it made me wary of her. Once when she had had a few drinks she told me some especially obscene jokes. Then she looked at me with a strange glint in her eyes. "Just because I talk to you like this, don't you get any ideas about me," she said.

"What kind of ideas?" I asked, trying to look innocent.

"Don't blink those wide blue eyes at me," Julie Bright said. "You damn well know what I mean. Don't you get any ideas about getting in my pants. I'm not that kind of trash."

I had never thought of such a thing, I told her. And it was the truth. She was almost as old as my mother. After that night I wasn't at ease around her.

I resumed the sports page, hoping she wouldn't say anything to me about Walt. Her eyes, I noticed, were glassier and her mouth a little slack; she must have had a big drink. I hated to see her drinking. Walt and Joe and Mole were almost always drinking and it didn't bother me. But there was something ugly and scary about Julie drinking. Maybe it was just that she was a woman. I had seen men, including my dad, drinking almost all my life and that was all right, but according to the society I grew up in, any woman who drank was wicked. But it was more than that too; I knew that when Julie drank there was likely to be trouble.

"Well hell," Julie said, as though she was angry at me for reading the paper and ignoring her. "Nothing to do here. I'm going in the back and relax. Call me if anybody comes in."

"Okay," I said. She went back through the kitchen to the little room where there was a cot, a comfortable chair and a radio. She and

Walt often went back there to get a nap or just to rest for a few minutes.

I continued reading about Saturday afternoon's football games. After a minute Joe came out of the kitchen and went into the diningroom to join Walt and his friends. He must have gotten bored standing in the kitchen waiting for an order. Sometimes when business was slack he read detective magazines and paperback mystery novels.

Why didn't we just wait till four to open on Sundays? I wondered. It was a waste. But of course Walt wasn't losing any money by having us all there. I suspected that he didn't pay Mole any more than he paid me, which amounted to about sixty cents an hour. Of course I got tips too. And I had learned tricks to get tips from people who didn't want to give them. But poor Mole would have worked all day for a pint of bootleg whiskey. And even Joe probably wasn't paid too well. Of course, Walt kept him in whiskey, which was a sizeable fringe benefit. I had seen Joe turn up a pint bottle and down a third of it at once, merely chasing it with water. But he could hold his liquor; never got out of hand, only very red in the face and sometimes sleepy looking.

After a few minutes I heard coins rattling in the diningroom, and then I recognized the sound of dice clicking off the baseboard. I put down my paper and went around the partition.

In the back part, where the diningroom was just a narrow corridor with one row of booths, the men were shooting dice. Walt and Jake and Joe sat on the ends of the booth seats with their legs out in the aisle. Albert, his grey hat cocked back, squatted on the floor. Walt was

shooting, bouncing the dice off the wall opposite the booth. When the dice rolled out of Walt's reach, Albert slid them back closer, but he didn't pick them up for Walt. No crapshooter likes for anyone to pick up his dice; might cool them off.

Joe and Jake and Albert placed their bets on the floor in front of them. They were betting quarters and half-dollars. When Walt won he reached down, his belly sagging between his legs, and raked the coins into the pile between his feet and when he lost he slid coins across the tile floor to each man.

As he shook the dice in his palm and rolled them, Walt talked to them in a sleepy, affectionate voice. "Come on, babies. Seven, eleven. Don't let me see any snake-eyes, treys or boxcars. Come to me, babies."

I squatted down in the aisle, facing Albert. Jake was on my left, then Walt in the middle, then Joe in the next seat and Albert squatting in front of Joe.

Walt threw a nine; then after four more throws he hit the nine again. He reached down and raked in the quarters and half-dollars. As he reached to pick up the dice he looked at me. "You want in?"

"Sure," I said. I took some change from my pocket and placed a quarter on the brown square of tile in front of me.

Walt was having a pretty good streak. I quickly lost all my change and had to dig into my billfold. But finally Walt crapped out and the dice passed on to Joe.

Joe rolled snake-eyes his first time and then crapped out on a six on his second point. I hated to see him have such bad luck but was glad

to get a couple of my quarters back. Albert kept the dice for ten or twelve points but he lost several times with twos, threes, or twelves.

When Albert crapped out the dice came to me. All the men had fifty-cent pieces in front of them. Standing to lose two dollars every time I rolled the dice made me a little nervous. The few times I had played with them before it had been only for dimes. But I was also excited about the prospects of winning two dollars a throw. I shifted around to face more toward the wall and got down on my knees. I rubbed the dice briskly between my palms to warm them up, whispered some sweet nothings to them and clicked them off the baseboard. They came up a two and a three. I rolled again, whispering. "Come on five baby. Don't let me see a seven." Two rolls later I hit the five again. I reached out and raked in the half-dollars.

I hit an eleven on the next throw, then made a nine and kept going strong. The quarters and half-dollars were accumulating between my knees.

"Okay if we raise the bet to a dollar?" Walt asked.

I knew it wasn't a smart thing to do; if my luck went bad I would lose the money back twice as fast as I had won it. But I was feeling cocky. "Sure," I said, "I'll cover a dollar."

Walt and Albert put down dollar bills, but Joe and Jake stuck with fifty cents. I blew on the dice, massaged them, whispered and rolled a ten, then hit the ten again on the third roll. Walt groaned.

I was hot. I must have kept the dice for twenty-five points, and during that time I rolled snake-eyes, treys or boxcars only a couple of times. Sometime during my run Walt asked to raise the bet to two dollars

and he bet two on every point. The others played more cautiously, waiting for a turn of luck. When I finally crapped out I had over fifty dollars between my knees, probably half of it Walt's. I was giddy with the excitement of winning, nervous and sweating under the arms. I had never had that much money before.

The dice went to Jake and he won a few, lost a few and crapped out. Walt took the dice and got down to some serious talking with them. He won his first two points, but I wasn't worried. I was betting only fifty cents.

"Come on," Walt said in a smiling cajoling way. "What you playing tight for? Put some money out there." But though he smiled, I could tell by the flash in his sleepy eyes that he ment business. I slipped two half-dollars out onto the brown square. As Walt rolled I picked up the bills from between my knees, folded them and stuffed them in the pocket of my jeans. I still had a sizeable pile of change in front of me.

Walt won the next two points and tried to get me to raise my bet, but I stuck to a dollar. On Walt's next roll a car began to blow out on the curb.

Walt looked at me indecisively. I knew he didn't want me to leave the game, even for business. He wanted his money back. "Well," he said irritably after a moment, "get moving and wait on 'em. We give quick service on Sunday just like any other day."

I gladly scooped up the coins, put them in the pockets of my white jacket, put on my little paper cap, and ran out to wait on the car.

When I came back inside, Walt still had the dice. "Joe," I said, "I need some sandwiches." Joe stood up, took the little green sheet from my order pad and went into the kitchen.

"Get your money out," Walt said to me. "We can roll a few while Joe's getting your order."

I squatted down and put a dollar in change in front of me. Walt won, but on his second throw another car began to blow. Julie Bright came around the corner into the diningroom. "You'd better break up this damn game," she said to Walt. "Unless you want to hang out the closed sign."

"Go wait on the car," Walt growled to me. But he shook the dice for another throw with Jake and Albert.

By the time I waited on that car, two more were on the curb. It was near sundown. Gambling, I hadn't realized how late it was getting.

Each time I came back inside, I heard the men still shooting craps in the diningroom. I hoped I would stay busy so I wouldn't have to get back in. Walt was getting too serious about it. He would keep making me raise my bets until he got all his money back and some to boot. I stayed outside as much as I could, using the curb service window in back of the soda fountain. Julie Bright was drawing the soft drinks, putting the orders on the trays and placing them in the curb window for me. She looked pretty high, but so far she hadn't spilled or dropped anything.

I stayed busy on the curb. Then about dark two well-dressed couples got out of a car and went inside for dinner. Now the crap game would have to end. I felt relieved. And I was happy for Joe. He liked having

people in the diningroom. He prepared the dinners with care and later, if he was not too busy, he would go out and speak to the diners. He was cordial and dignified and the customers seemed to appreciate it; it made them feel that they were in the big-time, dining in style. Except for the real hicks that sometimes came in. They would look at each other and act nervous and embarrassed, as though they thought Joe was trying to con them. They were probably afraid that having the chef come out would cost them extra.

A little later four guys went inside to the counter. Through the window I saw Walt waiting on them. I went inside to draw cokes and mix milkshakes for my curb orders, since Julie was waiting on the diningroom customers. I hoped she would manage without any mistakes or mishaps. I saw Walt look at her uneasily as she came swishing out of the diningroom and slapped an order down in the kitchen service window. She said something to Joe that I didn't understand, and through the window I saw him look up with an annoyed and worried expression.

I stayed on the run for over two hours. A lot of people always stopped in for sandwiches before going to the drive-in movie. Tips, intentional and unintentional, were adding a little to my gambling horde. To increase tips I had learned never to put a customer's change directly back into his hand; instead I would walk quietly up to the car and slip it onto a corner of the tray. If possible I would slide it under a napkin. If the customer later became upset and asked for his change, I would say, wide-eyed, "I put it on your tray, Sir." And sure enough he would find it there under a napkin. But usually they found it for

themselves or just forgot about it. Many times customers had forgotten and left the balance of five and ten dollar bills on their trays. Usually these were guys who were drinking or were pitching heavy woo with their girlfriends; so I told myself it was their own fault and my conscience didn't bother me too much.

Along about eight business slowed down and I was able to sit on a stool at the counter and watch the curb. It was a little too cool to sit on the folding chair out front as I sometimes did. Julie Bright still had customers in the diningroom and was bustling about, looking glassy-eyed and slightly out of control of her body. She had found time, I figured, to run into the back room for a couple more drinks.

Walt picked up the sandwich plates of the last two counter customers, put the plates in the dirty dish hamper, and wiped off the counter. Then he bent down and began to fumble around on the shelf below the cash register. He straightened up and slapped a deck of cards on the counter. "Let's play a little blackjack," he said with his sleepy-eyed, sinister grin.

Oh god, I thought, he won't leave me alone until he gets all his money back and some of mine too. I hadn't known Walt was such a sore loser. Maybe he was just in a bad mood because of Julie Bright. "I'm probably going to have more business on the curb," I said.

"We'll stop when a car comes in. Get your money out. You can't have a good streak and then quit. Got to give a fellow a chance to get his money back." He wasn't smiling his sleepy smile anymore. I reached in my jacket pocket and put a handful of quarters and halves on the counter.

"All right if I deal first?" Walt said.

I knew you were always supposed to cut for deal, but I said all right.

"Bet any amount you want," Walt said.

I slid out a quarter.

"Aw hell, at least make it interesting."

I slid out another quarter. He gave me a scornful, menacing look, didn't say anything, and slid the cards to me to cut. I noticed that his eyes and mouth were drooping more than when we were playing dice; he had found time for a drink or two. Probably he had taken Albert and Jake into the back room, where the whiskey was kept under the cot, and they had shared a pint. That would make Albert and Jake feel better about any money they had lost to him.

"Dealer wins ties; five and under pays double," Walt said as he thumped the cards down on the counter.

I had a six up and a jack in the hole. I asked for a hit and got a four. "I'll stick," I said.

Walt looked at his cards and looked at me. "Pay nineteen," he said, flipping over a king and an eight. I showed him my twenty and he slid fifty cents across the counter. "Look's like your luck's still good," he mumbled.

We played several more quick hands and were staying about even. Then a car horn blew. Julie Bright looked around the diningroom partition. "Why don't you put away those damn cards?" she said to Walt.

"Just mind your business," Walt said. I flinched; he was asking for trouble. He had had enough to drink now to make him reckless and mean.

"If you want to play cards we might as well close the damn place," Julie said.

Walt gave her a disdainful look. "If you get any drunker I think we will close."

"Drunk. Who's drunk?"

"Hell, the customers were sure giving you some funny looks."

"Shit, you're somebody to be talking about me drinking."

"I can hold my liquor."

Then Julie blew up as I was afraid she would. "You sonofabitch," and she came tearing around the end of the counter and slapped at the light switches beside the door. The curb went dark. "Okay," she said, "play your goddamn cards! We'll close the goddamn place!" Walt came around the counter faster than I thought he could move, shoved Julie aside and snapped the lights back on.

"Go wait on the damn car," he said to me.

I jumped up. I had forgotten about the car. Julie was calling Walt names, all she could think of, her voice getting shriller and louder. She really looked awful now, her hair out of place, her mouth smeared and twisted, her eyes wild.

"Shut your damn mouth," Walt warned her, and looking back after I had gone out the door I saw him grab her and clap his hand over her mouth. Then they fell back against the partition, struggling.

When I came back in with the order from the curb, I heard them cursing and scuffling in the diningroom. The light was out so that people outside couldn't see what was going on. I guessed that Joe had

come up and switched it out, but maybe Walt had had the presence of mind to do it himself. I took the order to the kitchen window and gave it to Joe.

"Don't let anyone come inside," Joe said. "Tell them we're closed except for curb service."

"Sounds like they're having another good one." I listened to the scuffling and grunting and cursing in the diningroom.

"At least he got hold of her before she started throwing things," Joe said.

"Yeah," I grinned. One Saturday night back in the summer Julie Bright had gotten drunk and thrown some heavy coffee mugs at Walt. One had taken a chunk of plaster out of the wall and another had gone through a front window. Walt had had to do some fancy ducking and dodging before he caught her and threw her down. He had held her on the floor behind the soda fountain for a long time, she cursing and kicking, he just grunting and breathing heavily. Then finally she had broken down and begun to cry. When Walt let her up she seemed limp and hardly able to stand. He told her to go lie down on the cot in the back room, and she stayed there the rest of the night.

I had been shocked and scared that first time. But Joe told me that it happened once every month or six weeks and that it always ended the same way, with Julie suddenly snapping out of her mad, violent state and starting to cry, then sleeping off the whiskey in the back room. The only variation was that some times Walt got pretty scratched up.

While Joe made my sandwiches I looked around the corner into the diningroom. Walt had Julie on her back on the floor, sitting astraddle

her stomach and holding her arms down beside her head. I could hear Walt breathing harshly in his throat and making a kind of snorting sound in his nose. Then Julie started cursing him again and trying to spit up into his face. But her lips weren't under control and the spit was falling back in her own face or on the shoulder of her white dress. Her face was going soft and loose and the deranged look was gone from her eyes. She was about ready to cry; it was almost over.

I went to the fountain, made the drinks to go with my order and took the order outside. When I came back in, the diningroom was quiet. I looked around the partition. Walt was probably in the back room with her, having a drink and maybe giving her another one so she would go to sleep quicker. I sat down on my lookout stool at the counter.

After a couple of minutes Walt came through the swinging kitchen door. His hair was freshly combed and his face washed. His soft gray flannel shirt was soiled; it looked like Julie's makeup had rubbed off on it, and one button was missing, but otherwise Walt looked okay, no visible bruises or scratches. When he reached the counter I could hear his breath rasping in his nose.

"Ready to play some more blackjack?" he asked huskily, in a way that was more a command than a question.

"If you want to," I said. Damn, I thought, after that scene still all he thinks about is getting his money back. I figured it was his pride that was at stake, having his money taken from him by a green kid like me.

"Let's raise the bet to a dollar," Walt said.

I slid the money onto the counter.

After a few hands another car pulled up out front. "Go on and wait on it," Walt said. "We'll just finish this hand when you get back."

There was only one man in the car. "A pint of Lord Calvert," he said in a low, confidential voice.

"What?" I asked, making a puzzled expression. Walt had told me never to sell whiskey to anyone I didn't recognize.

"A pint of Lord Calvert," the man repeated.

"What's Lord Calvert?"

"Aw hell, boy!" He opened the door and got out. I followed him inside. Walt knew him. "Go get him a pint," he told me.

I went back through the kitchen. Julie was sleeping on the cot, breathing noisily through the spit on her smeared lips. A couple of buttons were open on her dress, showing the tops of her breasts, and her skirt was pushed up high on her thighs. I got down on my knees, quietly pulled the cardboard box from under the cot, took out a pint and put it in a brown paper bag.

Walt and the man were still talking. I slid the bottle across the counter so that no one could see it from out front. The man turned his side toward the counter and slipped the bottle into his hip pocket under his coat. I took his $3.50 and rung it up on the register.

After he had gone out, Walt and I got back to our cards. I looked at the cards he had dealt me before I had gone to wait on the car. I had a jack up and a nine down. "I'm good," I said. Walt flipped over his cards, a ten and a king, and reached for my money.

He won the next four or five hands, two of them blackjacks, and then I had to run out to wait on another car. Walt didn't seem to mind having our game interrupted.

While I was waiting for Joe to make my order, Walt called me back to the counter. I won the first hand and then Walt won two and then he hit another blackjack. I was sure that his ace, the ace of clubs, was one he had dealt himself before I went out to wait on the car.

I got nervous. "Did you reshuffle the deck?" I asked.

"No." He gave me a mean, threatening look. "I've played enough blackjack to know you don't reshuffle till you've played the whole deck."

He seemed to be just waiting for me to accuse him of cheating, and daring me to do it. I didn't say anything. He dealt another hand and won. What could I do? If I accused him of cheating, that would probably be the end of my job. He might even take a punch at me.

He continued to win steadily. Then the deck ran out and he had to shuffle the cards while I watched. After that I did better, but I had already lost a lot of money, most of what I had won. Then a car pulled up out front and I went out to wait on it.

A little later a few other cars came in. But between orders we managed to play. Walt won almost every hand. I knew he was setting the deck while I was outside. He got blackjack often but I never once had an ace in my hand. He was being sure I didn't blackjack and get the cards away from him.

I went out to wait on another car and came back with an order. I put the order in the window for Joe and went to the fountain and started

drawing some cokes. I was really moving slow; if Walt saw me idle for a minute he would call me back to the game. But you can take only so long to run two cokes from a dispenser. I put the drinks on a tray and carefully arranged the napkins and straws and the little packets of salt and pepper and ketchup for the sandwiches and french fries. I was becoming very artistic about my tray arrangements.

"Come on, let's play a couple," Walt said impatiently from the counter.

"My order's about ready."

"We'll stop when it's ready. Come on."

As Walt dealt the cards, the kitchen door swung back and Mole's big-nosed, small-eyed face peeped out. Seeing no customers at the counter, he came shuffling around the fountain. On his almost bald head he wore a white cap like mine. He was so short that the white, bibbed apron, the strings that should have been at his waist tied low on his hips, reached almost to the top of his shoes. He bent down and slid the wire hamper of dirty dishes from under the counter.

"Hello, Mole," I said. "How's it going?"

He straightened up, his pinched mouth twitching as if he was trying to smile. "O-k-k-kay, B-b-bobby. H-h-how ya d-d-doin'?" He watched us play a hand, his little gray, red-rimmed eyes darting constantly from the cards to our faces.

"You'd better go wash those dishes, Mole," Walt said. "Won't be long till closing time."

Mole bent down, lifted the hamper of dirty dishes and shuffled around the fountain and into the kitchen.

We had time for three more quick hands; Walt won them all.

As I took the order out to the car, I said to myself, "Okay, two can play that game. If that sonofabitch is going to cheat me I'll cheat him." Pretty soon the drive-in movie would let out, we would get busy and I would have my chance.

Waiting for the rush to begin, I stalled around and played as few hands as possible. Walt let me win occasionally so the cheating would not be too obvious, but still I was losing fast. Then we saw the cars streaming from the drive-in exit and Walt put the deck under the counter.

Excited and nervous about what I was going to do, I ran out and began to wait on the cars. I knew that stealing, or knocking down, as I had heard it called, would be easy. There was no way for Walt to check up and know that money was missing. He was a careless manager. All he did each night was to unlock the little metal door on the front of the cash register, look at the total sales and count the money in the register to see if it corresponded. He didn't have us save the tickets from our order pads so that he could total them against the total in the cash register. We just threw the tickets in the trash along with the other paper. All I had to do was pocket the money from some of my orders instead of ringing it up on the register. I would have to be careful, though, and ring the register often so that Walt wouldn't begin to wonder.

I waited on four cars before I took any of the orders inside. The more I had going at one time the easier it would be to knock down. Then when I went back outside, the occupants of two cars got out to go into the diningroom. Walt would have to wait on them. That would make my job a lot easier.

I waited until I saw Walt go into the diningroom to wait on the customers; then I quickly collected for three orders at once. As I went inside with the money I did some quick figuring. The three orders came to a total of $8.75. I would ring up $3.75 and that would mean I could pocket a five-dollar bill. I didn't want to stuff my pockets with change and ones; that might be obvious.

I glanced around the partition to see that Walt was still occupied. Then I quickly rang up .50¢ for each of the first two orders and then $2.75, which was the correct amount for one of the orders. There was no way anyone could know that I hadn't rung up the correct amounts for the first two. The register didn't record the individual amounts on a paper tape; it just registered the total sales inside like the mileage on a speedometer. Standing against the counter where no one could possibly see, I folded the five into a small square and slipped it into the watch pocket of my jeans.

As I went back outside to wait on another car I noticed that my heart was pounding. But I felt exhilarated. Serves the cheat right, I told myself. And not just for cheating me at cards, but also for underpaying me. He was exploiting a minor, working me long, late hours and paying below the minimum wage. I was taking only what I deserved, and not even that much.

The curb stayed pretty busy, and the next time I pocketed a five it was easier. My heart didn't even pound much. Stealing the money was so simple that I wondered why I hadn't done it before, at least a little, just to bring my pay up to a reasonable level. I was already looking forward to next weekend when I could get back the rest of the money Walt

had cheated me out of. If I could pocket ten dollars this quickly, what could I do on a long, busy Saturday night?

And after getting my money back next weekend? I asked myself. What then? Well, who knew? It hadn't taken me long to get used to the idea of stealing. Or maybe I had been thinking about it for a while and now Walt had given me the justification I needed. But I didn't dwell on these thoughts. I was already thinking of the money I would have in the future and of what I wanted to buy with it. I could even save for a car.

The rush petered out before I could pocket another five. I counted the money I had left from the dice game — only about six dollars. That ment that Walt had taken around forty-five dollars from me. Minus the ten I had knocked down, that left thirty-five dollars he still owed me. If I couldn't get it all next weekend, then I could continue the following — and with interest.

After the diningroom customers had left and I had waited on all the cars on the curb, I began getting ready for closing. Mole was already mopping the diningroom. I emptied all the trash cans into the big barrel out back where we burned it. Then I wiped off the tables and the counter and began to clean up the fountain.

Walt came out of the kitchen. "Let's play a few more hands."

"It's closing time," I said. I kept on wiping the fountain.

"We won't play long." He gave me his crafty, sleepy grin.

"You've already won all the money back," I said.

"No, I don't think so," Walt said. "You had a big pile of money in there."

"Just six dollars," I said. "I swear. That's all I've got left of the fifty I won. You've taken it all."

"Well, maybe you can win some of it back. Come on."

I put down my towel, went around the counter and sat down. I pulled out the six dollars and put it on the counter. "All right," I told myself. "Let the sonofabitch have it. He'll pay."

Walt didn't take long in getting it.

"Now can I quit?" I asked. "I have to get up and go to school in the morning."

Walt gave me a sly, gloating smile. "Yeah," he said, "you can quit now."

THE CONTRACT

I was sitting on the railing across from the jukebox when the guy came up and looked at me like he had a grudge. I ignored him and watched the jitterbuggers on the floor. He leaned against the railing and darted hostile glances up at me.

"You dance like that?" he finally asked.

"A little," I said, being modest.

"You a cat?" When he said cat his lip curled in a sneer.

I looked down at him with the haughty expression I had seen some of the real cats use with the straight guys — the peasants, they called them.

"Yeah," he said. "I can tell. You're a real cat."

I didn't even glance at him, just kept watching the dancers with my practiced, critical eye.

"You think you're hot shit don't you, buddy!"

I slid forward on the railing until my feet touched the floor. It was a long drop from the platform to the ground; I didn't want to get knocked off and land on my head. He kept watching me in that hungry expectant way.

"Look, man," I said in a weary, matter-of-fact voice I had learned from the older cats, "I don't want any trouble with you. Why don't you just move on?" He kept staring at me. I figured he had had a few too many beers. Or if he was, as I thought, a marine from Le Jeune, he was probably a little crazy from the basic training. Most of the marines

who came to the beach on weekend passes seemed vaguely mad. But no more mad, I realize now, than the beachbums who were my models then. Actually I wasn't a beachbum myself; I worked at a lunch counter. But I aspired.

"Yeah," he said again, "you're real hot shit."

"Look, man," I said, still maintaining the bored voice. "Why are you trying to give me a bad time? Did I spit in your beer?" I flipped my own beer can over my shoulder. It plopped softly in the sand ten feet below. In the lull of the jukebox I could hear the surf behind us. The marine kept looking at me, his face angry and uncertain. He couldn't figure out if I was afraid or if I was super-cool. I hoped he would think the latter.

"Yeah, you're a real pretty cat." He was taking a different tone; taunting, almost teasing, as if we were friends and he was giving me a bad time just for fun. "I like that long bleached hair," he went on. "That's a real fancy duck's-ass you got there." He leaned back to look at the back of my head.

"Thanks," I said, glancing at his crewcut. It was bleached too, but only by the sun, and his arms and neck and face were a dark, weathered red. "I like yours, too," I said. His eyes flashed up at me, and I wished I hadn't used the sarcasm.

"And those pants," he jeered, controlling his anger. "Those pants are really pretty." He pretended to be studying them carefully. I <u>was</u> self-conscious about the pants — tailored, with tightly pegged legs, three-quarter inch welted seams, triangular belt loops, and two large snap-down triangular flaps on each back pocket. Very chic in the mid-fifties. Pea green they were.

"Glad you like them." I looked disdainfully at his straight-legged baggy pants and his cheap looking blue-checkered sport shirt with the collar pressed out flat toward the shoulders. I raised my hand and felt my neat button-down. "You're a sharp dresser yourself," I said.

Again I was sorry I had used the sarcasm. Marine glared at me. "Goddamn you," he hissed, getting close to my face, "You come out on the beach and I'll stomp your cute ass!"

"Man," I said smoothly, "if I want to go out on the beach I'll go with one of the chicks." I had been looking around the crowded dance floor for some of the beachbums I knew. But with the dim lights it was hard to recognize anyone.

"You're chicken-shit," Marine said, confident now, knowing I wasn't a fighter.

"You don't scare me, Leatherneck," I said. "I'm just not interested in fighting. I've got nothing to gain. Beating your ass wouldn't do a thing for me." I had seen Charlie Harlick and Little Burt cross the floor to the counter for a beer. I hoped when they came back I could catch their eye. I didn't want to just run over to them. I had my pride.

"You're just a yellow chicken-shit," Marine repeated. "Come on out on the beach!"

"If you're so sure you can take me, why don't you do it here?" He wouldn't start a fight on the floor, I was sure, because a cop was always on duty at Duffy's Pavilion. I watched Charlie and Burt come across from the beer counter. When they were near us Little Burt glanced our way and I caught his eye. Marine in a warlike stance was repeating his challenge.

"What's the trouble, man?" Little Burt asked.

"No real trouble," I answered calmly. "Leatherneck here is restless and wants me to step out on the beach with him. But I don't want to get sand in my shoes."

Charlie smiled and turned to Marine. "You really restless?" he asked, smiling down. He towered about two feet over Little Burt and more than a foot over Marine. "I'll go out and give you a little exercise," he offered, very friendly. Marine looked at grinning, bear-like Charlie and at Little Burt straining toward him like a chained dog. He stepped quickly around me and went across the dance floor and into the pavilion.

"Don't let any of these GI hicks give you any shit," Charlie said. "We'll take care of you. Just call us." He clapped me on the shoulder in a possessive way and I felt like a woman.

"Thanks, Charlie," I said, staying serene.

"Right, man," Little Burt said. "If he comes back you let us know. I'd like a piece of that marine's ass." He was almost bobbing and weaving as he talked. Once he got the yearning Little Burt wanted a fight the way an alcholic wants a drink. He had been a champion fly-weight in the Golden Gloves.

"I'll do it, Burt," I said. "I'd like to see you punch that bastard out of his shoes."

Charlie and Burt went back to their girls and I went to get another beer. I felt rotten; I knew I had obligated myself to them. They hadn't come over because they were my friends, but because I could supply them

with food. All the cats needed someone they could depend on to slip them a free sandwich from time to time. They couldn't be sure of having a woman to live on every week. They needed security.

I went back and sat on the rail, drinking my beer and feeling glum. So far I had avoided feeding any of the cats. I was afraid. Not only would I lose my job if I got caught; some employers had had boys arrested for larceny. There was a heavy fine and they had to call their families to get them out of jail. And although I didn't want to admit it then, my conscience told me I shouldn't do it; it was stealing. Maybe I could put them off by saying my boss was having me watched.

I sipped my beer. Maybe I could do that. There was talk around the beach that employers were hiring "spotters" to watch their businesses for signs of dishonesty. I could probably put them off at least temporarily. And if they pressured me too much I could quit my job and go home. It might come to the point that they would beat me up if I didn't feed them. I had heard of such cases on the beach. A kind of small-time protection racket.

When the jukebox stopped I saw Little Burt leave the crowd and come toward me. "Not dancing tonight, man?" he asked, very chummy. "Taking a night off from the chicks, huh?" He was flattering me; he knew I wasn't suave with girls. Sure, I'd ask them to jitterbug, but that's about as far as I got. I was just seventeen that summer and back home I hadn't taken girls out much. Wilson Martin, who worked where I did, had shaken his head in disapproval and said I was too young to be working at the beach. Meaning, I suppose, that I would be corrupted at such a tender age.

"Yeah," I answered Burt wearily. "Not staying out late. Have to work the early shift tomorrow."

"Rough getting up that early," Burt sympathized. "That's a pretty good job you got though, ain't it?"

"Pays the rent," I said, trying to dismiss the subject before he asked me for a loan.

"Man, I don't blame you for not going onto the beach with that marine. He probably had something in his pocket." Burt knew I wouldn't have gone with Marine under any circumstances.

"I didn't have anything to gain by fighting that hick," I said. "Beating his ass wouldn't have done a thing for me."

I could see that my thinking didn't appeal to Burt; beating someone's ass did do something for him. But he agreed, "That's right man, taking a piece of him wouldn't put any money in your pocket." I didn't say anything, and Burt went on, as if it had just occurred to him: "Speaking of money, cat, I need a beer. Could you let me hold a little change?"

I thought of saying I didn't have any money, but I was afraid to lie to him, and besides there was my conscience. I reached in my pocket and gave him the price of a beer.

"Thanks, cat," Burt said and went toward the counter. He probably had money in his pockets but wanted to hit me while I was ripe. It would prepare the way for later handouts.

I figured I'd better finish my beer and leave before Burt wanted another one. But just as I was taking my last swallow I saw Marine coming along the edge of the dance floor. Coward that I was, I glanced

quickly around for help. I didn't see Burt or Charlie. Little Burt might be hidden in the crowd, but not Charlie; I would have seen his head in the smoky stratosphere. Sure, I thought, Marine must have waited outside until he saw them leave. I slipped off the railing.

"Hello, pretty boy," Marine said. "Ready to go on the beach? What you stretchin' your neck for? Your big friend's not around."

That gave me some hope; he hadn't said anything about my little friend. "Look," I stalled, "why are you after me? I haven't done anything to you. If you want a fight so damn bad why don't you find somebody else who wants to fight?"

"I want to stomp your pretty ass," he sneered. "Come on!"

"If you want to stomp my ass you'll have to do it right here," I said.

"You chicken-shit bastard, you know there's a cop over there. You yellow sonofabitch!"

I had to do something, either fight him or leave the place. I couldn't just stand there and let him call me a sonofabitch. I wish I had had a chance to make that decision — it would have been an important one. But when I looked up, there was Little Burt.

"You givin' my boy trouble again?" Burt asked in a soft, almost polite voice, but deadly like the hiss of a snake. His saying "my boy" made me feel like a prostitute or a queer.

Marine answered carefully, not wanting to antagonize Burt: "I'd like to take a few punches at his cute face if that's okay with you." He even smiled, and looking at Burt I thought I saw something like mirth pass over his scarred, puffy face, his dark little eyes. It seemed there was

an understanding between him and Marine. I had the feeling that maybe Burt would like to take a few punches at my face too. But he had more to gain by protecting me.

"Man," Burt said, still calm, "if you want to do some stroking why don't you try me?"

Marine looked at me and back at Burt. He didn't seem to be afraid; Burt was smaller than he was. But it was me he wanted. And Burt did look dangerous with his muscled shoulders and arms and his lips and eyebrows heavy with scar tissue. "Why don't you let this cat fight his own fights?" Marine asked politely.

Burt looked at me. He seemed to be thinking. "He can fight you if he wants to," he told Marine. He looked at me again, calculating. "You want to fight him, man?" He was going to make me ask him, put myself under obligation. We both understood the terms of the agreement: I would get protection, Burt would get free food when he wanted it and maybe a little money from time to time.

"I'm not looking for a fight with anyone," I said, trying to stay calm. "If he wants to fight let him find someone else." I should have at least had the honesty and courage to run instead of standing there trying to bluff it out.

"Look, man," Burt said, no longer friendly, "you goin' to fight him or do you want me to?"

Seeing how matters stood between me and Burt, Marine was confident again. He repeated his assortment of names for me.

"You goin' to let him talk to you like that?" Burt asked.

"Come on you yellow sonofabitch!" Marine was itching to get at me.

"Look, cat." Burt gave me a look of pity that hurt deeper than Marine's calling me a sonofabitch. "You want to fight him or not?"

I didn't say anything, hoping for a miracle. "Okay," Burt said, "I'll go with you to see everything's clean." He seized my arm and turned me toward the stairs leading down to the beach. I took a few steps but held back. "What's wrong, man?" Burt was mocking me now.

"I'm going home," I said, my coolness spent.

"No, cat. Leatherneck wants to fight and you're goin' to do it unless you want me to." He guided me down the steps; I was too confused and scared even to resist. We walked through the deep sand away from the lights of the dance floor. When we reached the firmer sand near the edge of the water we stopped and Marine stepped in front of me. There was enough moonlight for me to see his face. He looked like a grinning, slavering dog. "Burt," I said quickly, trying to keep my voice from shaking, "why don't you fight him? You like to fight."

"You sure you want me to?"

I looked at Marine, his eyes glassed over, his arms twitching at his sides. "Yes," I said.

Burt stepped toward Marine. "Okay, man," he whispered, "you ready?"

"Yeah," Marine breathed, almost like a sigh of lust. He was so crazed now he would have fought Charlie. "Then I can get pretty boy!"

He had hardly finished speaking when Burt hit him. He hit him two or three times so fast that I wasn't sure I had seen it, only heard the impact of bone and flesh. Marine didn't even get his arms up to protect

his face; he started folding the knees, and Burt must have hit him six or eight more times as he went down, the combinations so fast I saw only a blur of piston-like movement. Marine lay curled in the sand.

Burt and I walked back to the dance floor. "Man, after that I need a beer," he said.

IN THE PINES

When Marge Cheek had fried another panful of eggs she and Bonnie sat down with the men. Bonnie looked at Henry, but he wasn't looking at anyone or anything. What's he thinking about all the time? she wondered. Almost every morning when Henry and her father came in from the still, he was quiet and his mind seemed far away.

"Well, I'm going in and get some sleep," Bonnie's father announced, wiping the egg yellow from his plate with a biscuit half. "You come on over this evening, Henry, unless you change your mind."

"I'll be here," Henry said quietly. He stood up to go. "Be seeing you," he said to Bonnie and Marge. Bonnie felt and saw him looking at her for the first time this morning. "I'll walk down the road with you a piece," she said. But her voice was questioning, her eyes cautious, because sometimes Henry wanted to be left alone.

"You hurry back here in a minute," her mother said. "I've got some things for you to do."

Bonnie followed Henry out the back door; they went around the house and started down the red clay road. The sun was above the trees now and so bright it made her dizzy for a moment. They walked along silently, he in one track of the red road and she in the other. The air was heavy with the turpentine smell of pines, and off in the distance crows were cawing.

After a while Bonnie spoke timidly: "Why are driving the load of whiskey, Henry? You might go to prison."

They walked on for a moment. "I might go anyway if I'm caught helping your Dad."

"Then why do you do it?"

"I've got to do something. I want to get away from here. So I need some money."

Bonnie looked confused. "Don't you like it here?"

"Do you?" His voice was soft and far-off, like the sound of the crows beyond the pinewoods.

"I don't know," Bonnie faltered. "I never thought much about it. I don't know any other place."

"Haven't you read about other places or seen them in movies?"

"Yeah. But I never thought about going anywhere. Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know. Out west maybe. Maybe California."

"To stay? Won't you come back?" Although she was looking down at her feet she felt him turn toward her and stop in the road.

"I don't know," he said. "What are you going to do? Just stay around here all your life?"

Bonnie stood surprised and baffled, shading her eyes against the sun. "I don't know," she stammered. "I never thought . . ."

"What'll you ever do here?" Henry asked, the words coming quiet and distant, like creekwater playing through the rocks, not really asking her but asking the hills and woods and fields, asking the quiet and

lonesomeness. "What'll you ever do? Just marry one of these old farmer boys and get woreout and ugly?"

"I don't know," Bonnie protested, looking off into the dark, winey pinewoods. "I never thought about it." Her bewildered eyes searched the trees.

Henry took a step toward her, his feet plashing in the heavy dust between the wheel tracks, making a pink haze about his ankles. There was a yearning in his eyes that stirred something in her and troubled her. "I'd better go back and help Mama," she said.

The hungry look went out of Henry's eyes and a faint smile passed over his lips. "I guess I'll see you tonight. Don't let what I've been saying worry you."

Bonnie watched him walk tiredly down the road until he rounded a curve and was hidden from her by the pines. Henry was different, she thought. Moving to the city had changed him. And his mother and little brother not coming back to the farm with him and his dad must have been hard on him. He never mentioned her. Nobody knew what had happened. Whatever it was, Henry was trying to keep it from his mind. But she knew he couldn't. She wished he would talk to her about it. Striding back uphill to the house she told herself that that was what he needed, someone to talk to.

In late afternoon Will Cheek came into the kitchen where Marge and Bonnie were lifting hot mason jars of tomatoes from the canner and setting them on the table to cool along with the other quarts of tomatoes and green beans. Several of the metal jar-lids popped in rapid succession.

"Sounds like they're sealing good," Marge said, looking with satisfaction at the jars lined up on the table. "How many jars of tomatoes and beans does that make we've put up this summer?"

"Thirty-six tomatoes and thirty beans," Bonnie answered, knowing that her mother knew. She could give the exact number of everything she had canned all summer, even the pints of jellies and preserves. She just wants me to say it instead of her, Bonnie thought. Because if she said it, it would sound like bragging.

"Did you sleep good?" Marge finally asked Will as she set the last quart of tomatoes on the table.

"Yeah, slept a long time. Guess I needed it. You going to have supper ready before we go to haul up the whiskey?"

"I still don't think you ought to let that boy do it, Will," Marge said. "He might get caught or get in a chase and have a wreck."

"I didn't ask him to," Will said. "He kept asking me to let him. He wants the extra money I'll pay him."

"He's too young to do it."

"I've already told him he could." He turned to leave the kitchen. "Are you going to have supper ready?" he asked irritably as he went out the door.

As Marge began to prepare the meal Bonnie went out back and sat on one of the big blocks of wood under the maple. Down the hill she saw her father come out of the barn and open the pasture gate. He began to call the mule, his voice echoing back from the woods and hillside, "cu-up, cu-up, cuu-up." Sounds kind of like the turtle doves, Bonnie thought.

Sad like that, like somebody grieving. During the morning as she peeled tomatoes and strung greenbeans on the back porch she had listened to the doves calling back and forth in the pines. Their calls made her think of her and Henry talking in the road. They sounded sad, but quiet and easy. Mourning doves, some people called them.

"Cu-up, cu-up, cuu-up," her father's voice came back from the woods and hillside. Why did you call mules like that? Bonnie wondered. Why did they understand and come to you? And there were ways for calling dogs and cows and pigs and chickens. Why couldn't you call them all the same way? Did the different sounds mean something to the animals?

Bonnie grinned as she noticed her father's voice begin to sound like threatening and cursing. Finally the black mule came out of the bushes and ambled toward the gate. If that lazy devil knew he was going to have to pull a sled-load of whiskey he'd come even slower, Bonnie thought. Or maybe he'd just stay hid in the bushes. The mule came out the gate and disappeared into the dark entryway of the barn. The bridle in his hand, her father followed it in, and in a moment she heard the rattle of chains as he lifted the harness onto the mule's shoulders.

Down in the pasture two whippoorwills began, their calls rising up human sounding as if from the earth itself. Her chin in her hands Bonnie sat listening. On the hill beyond the barn the red sun glinted through the treetops. Why does everything sound so lonesome? Bonnie wondered. The doves and Papa's calling and now the whippoorwills. Were birds and animals and people all lonesome? She looked up, startled. Henry had come around the house and was coming toward her. "Papa's down

hitching up the mule," she said quickly. Henry nodded, glancing toward the barn. "Did you eat yet?" Bonnie asked. "Mama's fixing supper. Come on in and have some."

Hearing chains jangle they turned toward the barn. Will was leading the mule up toward the house, the wooden sled gliding along behind, jerking and bouncing when one of the runners hit a tuft of grass or a rock, the tracechains rattling and clanging against the metal singletree. Will tied the mule to a cherry tree and came toward them. "Well, you ready to drive the load tonight?" he asked Henry.

"I'm ready," Henry said.

Limping and rubbing the back of her thigh that had gone numb from being motionless so long on the hard block, Bonnie followed the men into the kitchen. They took their places at the table and began to eat.

Finally Marge broke the silence: "Well, you're going to do it, I reckon, Henry?"

"Yes, Mam."

"And we might as well get started," Will said, taking the last bite of biscuit that he had wiped his plate with.

"It's still light," Marge said.

"Won't be nobody in the woods this late. If we do run across somebody we can just say we're out looking for some kindling." He stood up. "Anyway, it'll be dark by the time we get to the still."

Henry followed him from the room. "Thanks for the supper," he called back as he went out the door. Bonnie jumped up and ran to the backporch. "Papa," she called, "I'll come along and help."

Will stopped and looked thoughtfully at the ground. "Okay," he said. "It'll save us some time getting the jars carried out. Bring the other lantern."

Bonnie grabbed the lantern from the nail where it hung on the back-porch and dashed after them. They went around the garden and into the pinewoods, Will leading the mule and Henry and Bonnie following behind. Will picked a path carefully through the trees. Often Henry had to shove the sled to one side to prevent its catching against a pine. Coming back will be really hard, Bonnie thought. It'll be dark and uphill, and with the whiskey on the sled Henry won't be able to shove it so easy.

Once out of the pines they speeded up. The oaks did not grow so thick and they went straight down the hill without having to twist and turn to find a path. The sled zipped along over the leaves and banged the singletree against the mule's heels, making it jump forward. Bonnie grinned. Fastest I've ever seen old Blackie move, she thought. Must've woke him up. Pulling that sledload of whiskey back up the hill will probably kill him.

The sled rode easily along the creek, bending the briars and grass beneath it, only now and then catching on a small bush, and soon they were at the edge of the thicket. Will tied the mule to a bush near the opening. "Let's don't use the lanterns unless we have to," he said. "Somebody might see them. The moon'll be up soon."

But under the bushes it was almost dark and they decided to hang one of the lanterns near each end of the path. "Couldn't anybody see them in here under the bushes unless they were awful close," Will reasoned. "And then they'd probably hear us or see the mule anyway."

Will and Henry scraped away the leaves and grass from the spot in the clearing, then lifted away the boards and laid them to one side. Henry slid down into the empty corner of the square pit and began to lift out the cardboard boxes, each containing four half-gallon jars of whiskey. Will picked up a box and, hunched over, started through the bushes toward the sled. Bonnie heaved one from the ground and struggled a few steps.

"That's too heavy for you," Henry said from the pit. "Take just two jars at a time." Bonnie pulled apart the flaps and lifted out two jars of clear corn-whiskey. Taking one under each arm she went into the tunnel of bushes, yellow beneath the smoking lantern. She set the jars near the sled and then went back for the box containing the other two. After she put the jars back into the compartments Will lifted the box onto the sled.

Henry finished lifting the boxes out of the pit and helped Will complete the loading. The moon was up now, three-quarters full, silvering the grass in the clearing. Henry jumped back into the pit and threw out a piece of canvas and two coils of rope; then he and Will replaced the boards and covered them carefully with dirt and grass and leaves, inspecting their work with the lantern. Next they took canvas and ropes to the sled, covered the boxes of whiskey and carefully lashed them down.

"Bonnie," Will said, "you take one of the lanterns and walk up in front so I can see ahead a piece. Henry, you walk alongside with the other one and look out for rocks and snags. Yell if you see the sled's going to hit something."

The mule jerked and strained to get the heavy sled moving, and several times along the creek they had to stop to let the mule rest. Once a runner hooked on an oak bush and Will and Henry had to push and pull to edge the sled backward. "Should've brought the axe," Will said. "Specially since we were going to use getting kindling for an alibi."

The going was slow uphill through the oaks. In the light from Henry's lantern Bonnie could see the mule's legs quivering as it hunched its back and lowered its head with the strain, and when they stopped to rest she noticed that foam dripped from its lips, and its chest and sides and flanks were lathered with sweat. Poor old mule, she thought, you don't work much anymore but when you do it's hard on you. She scratched it between the ears while its sides heaved in and out like a bellows and the hot breath whistled through its nose. Old Blackie used to work a lot, she recalled. Planting and plowing the corn and cotton. But the last few years her dad had just about quit farming. All he did now was raise some corn to make the whiskey. No money in farming anymore, he said. Planting and plowing weren't worth the trouble. A little farmer didn't have a chance; the big farmer was the only one that could make it anymore. Her mother had said that he ought to get a job at the new mill down in Ettrick, like their neighbor, Mr. Rash, and some of the other men had. But he said he wouldn't work in a mill making ladies' stockings. None of his family had ever done public work, he said; they had always been farmers. He would get money to support his family, but he wasn't going to work in any damn mill or factory. Bonnie scratched the mule between his ears and stared up through the broad limbs of the oak tree; through a break in the heavy leaves she could see a small patch of

luminous summer sky. She counted four stars, but then when she looked again she could find only three.

"We better get going," Will said.

Once they were up the hill and into the pines the pulling was easier but they had to pick their way carefully. Several times they stopped to shove the front of the sled to one side to avoid a tree. Finally they came out of the pines, went along the edge of the garden, across the backyard and down the hill to the barn. Will guided the mule into the wide entry, getting the sled close behind the old flat-bed truck. Bonnie and Henry hung the lanterns on nails on opposite sides of the entry, and while Will unhitched and unharnessed the mule, they unlashed the load of whiskey. When Will came back from putting the mule in its stable, Bonnie climbed onto the truck to slide the boxes of whiskey into place as the men lifted them up. "Leave room around the sides," Will told her.

When they finished loading the whiskey, Will and Henry surrounded the boxes with a row of hay bales and put another layer of bales on top. Then they put the sideboards and the tailboards in place. The boards came up almost to the top of the hay but the bottom layer of bales showed through the cracks. "Nobody ought to get suspicious of that," Henry said.

"Okay," Will said, "start her up and bring it on up to the house. We'll drink some coffee and I'll give you directions again." He and Bonnie held the lanterns while Henry backed the truck out of the barn, then they followed the single red taillight that shone on the license plate up the hill to the house.

In the kitchen Marge had coffee ready. "I've got a peach pie if you want some," she said. Will and Henry nodded. She cut large pieces

and brought them to the table. "Henry, how are you feeling?" she asked. "You still want to do it?"

"Yes, Mam," he said, not looking up from his pie.

"Now if the law comes after you you just stop and tell them everything, you hear."

"I told him that, Marge," Will broke in.

"All right," Marge sighed. "But I still don't think you ought to let him do it." She started from the room. "I'm going to bed. You'd better too," she said to Bonnie who was leaning against the sink. "We've got to get up for Sunday school in the morning."

In bed Bonnie could hear the murmur of voices, mostly her father's, from the kitchen. Then she heard them go out to the side of the house where Henry had stopped the truck. After a minute the truck clattered to a start and faded away down the road in front of the house. Her father came in the backdoor, snapped off the kitchen light, and crossed the hall to the bedroom. Before falling asleep Bonnie thought she could hear him and her mother talking.

After they had returned home from church and eaten dinner Bonnie went to her room and took off her Sunday dress. She put on her jeans and shirt and lay down on the bed. The house was silent except for a kind of humming she always noticed on Sunday afternoons. Her mother had gone into the livingroom as usual on Sundays to do some mending and try to read the Bible. Her father would be stretched out on the sofa as usual, but today he probably wouldn't be sleeping; he would be thinking about Henry.

Outside the window bird cries pierced the bright hot silence, and the smell of dry grass and earth drifted in on the still air. After staring at the ceiling for several minutes Bonnie sat up and pulled on her sneakers.

"Where are you going?" Marge called softly as Bonnie started down the hall.

"Just for a little walk. Is Papa asleep?"

"Nope, I'm wide awake," Will answered from the sofa.

"When do you reckon Henry'll be back?"

"Like I said, he ought to be coming in any time now."

Bonnie went out the backdoor and toward the garden. There'll be more canning to do in a few days, she thought, looking at the tomatoes and greenbeans. She stooped and pushed back the broad leaves of the squash vines; the larger squash were beginning to turn yellow. Fried squash will taste good for a change, she thought. Stepping through the vines, she looked at the okra, but was careful not to touch the pods or stalks because they would make her itch. She went on across the garden, stopping to press an ear of corn, and entered the woods.

A short way into the trees she sat down on a bed of needles at the foot of a large pine. Although she tried to relax and slip into a dreamy mood as she usually did in the woods, she found herself sitting tensely, listening for the sound of the truck coming up the dirt road. I've been jumpy all day, she thought. And Mama's been too.

But maybe it was just the lie bothering her mother, Bonnie reasoned. Mrs. Rash had seen them walking up the highway to the church and asked

why Will hadn't come or at least brought them in the truck and then picked them up, as he often did. Marge answered that he was sick and had stayed in bed.

"It ain't like Will to stay in bed, even if he is sick," Mr. Rash smiled. "You better get a doctor. Must be something serious."

Her mother had colored and stammered and finally said, "Oh, no. Just a cold, I reckon." Bonnie saw Mr. and Mrs. Rash look at each other like they didn't believe it, and during preaching she watched her mother's face, knowing that she was thinking about the lie.

But that's not what's bothering me, Bonnie admitted. He was supposed to be back by dinnertime. Maybe he just slept late at the bootlegger's house. She sat back against the tree, listening for any sound along the road. Down through the pines the two doves began to call back and forth. Sounds kind of like people singing hymns in church, she thought. Yearning and lonesome like that.

Suddenly Bonnie stiffened and leaned forward, listening to sound along the road. But it didn't sound like the truck, she thought, already up and running toward the house. When she came around the garden she saw Mr. Rash's old red car in the front yard. She went along the side of the house and glanced in the livingroom window. Her mother and father and Mr. Rash were sitting forward in their chairs, each gazing rigidly across the room. Bonnie went suddenly cold inside and was afraid to go into the house. Hardly breathing, she stepped to one side of the window and leaned her back against the rough boards; the woods and red road dazzled in the hot sunlight. Her knees felt watery and her heart was

pounding so that for a minute she couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Yeah," Mr. Rash's voice came faintly above the hammering of her heart, "from what the deputy said I figured it was your truck. Henry got the whiskey delivered all right and was sleeping there at the bootlegger's house."

Then her mother said something but Bonnie missed the words.

"Well," Mr. Rash continued, "the way I got it from the deputy that came by asking where Henry's folks live was that Henry was sleeping upstairs when the Law raided the bootlegger's. He climbed out the window, jumped off the porch roof and took off in the truck. He got out of town all right, but then another police car got after him. I reckon one of the men at the bootlegger's house called the station and they sent another car out looking for Henry. The boy ought to've had more sense than try to outrun anything in that old truck of yours."

Bonnie heard her father's voice for the first time. "I told him if the police got after him to just stop and tell them everything. I'd get the sentence, not him, since he's a minor. I reckon I better go in and see the sheriff before he comes out here."

In the silence that followed Bonnie stood rigid against the side of the house. She thought she was going to cry out and she raised her fist to her mouth and put it between her teeth. Finally Mr. Rash's voice went on: "Coming down the mountain he sideswiped a big trailer-truck and run off the road."

Bonnie heard her mother's voice, but the only word that she understood was "die."

Mr. Rash answered softly: "They said he was dead when they pulled him out of the truck."

Bonnie's knees folded and she sank down, the weathered planks scrapeing her back through the denim shirt, and sat with a thump on the hard, dusty earth. Before her moist eyes the red road dazzled and swam, and her breath came painfully. Through the clamor in her mind she heard the call of the doves rising insistently from the dark pines.

THE DESERTER

After they left Ettrick and started the last seven miles to his father's farm, Mark Armstead grew more and more excited. Turning off the highway, he gripped the steering wheel so tensely his knuckles showed white.

"So this is it?" Sharon said. "The old home place." She looked almost boyish, thin, with short brown hair.

Mark's red head nodded jerkily, and his pale blue eyes stared as if trying to see through the trees to the house, still half a mile away. It was near sundown; the shadows of the pines lay blue as ice across the dirt road and onto the field of young wheat.

They came around a bend, and there above them among the big oaks stood the house. Mark was startled by the bright whiteness of new paint. This wasn't the rundown place he had left. Dark grey asbestos shingles had replaced the rusty, red tin roof. The scraggly yard had become a smooth green lawn and there were neatly trimmed shrubs along the front of the house. How had they managed all that? Where had they gotten the money? It wasn't the same place at all.

They topped the little rise and pulled up under the oak trees. Mark was aware of people coming out onto the front porch, but he could not see or think clearly enough to distinguish one figure from another. He left the car and started toward the porch. He was aware of his mother hugging him and his father stepping stiffly forward to shake his

hand, and his brother's arm around his shoulders as they shook hands and spoke. Then he was introduced to his brother's wife Paula.

"Well, ain't you going to introduce us to your wife?" Harlan asked.

Mark turned and saw Sharon standing on the steps, looking painfully self-conscious. During the trip he had wondered how she would react, for she had never had a family, at least not since her childhood. He had hoped that by bringing her here he could make her understand his feelings toward his family and his past. "This is Sharon," he said, leading her onto the porch. Then his mother was hugging her, his father awkwardly nodding and mumbling something. Harlan stepped gallantly forward, kissed her cheek and said he didn't see how Mark had gotten such a pretty girl. Then Paula was talking with her as they all went into the livingroom.

At dawn Mark awoke and heard birds chattering in the bushes and fruit trees around the house. The air was chilly and he pulled the blanket up around his shoulders. The morning was pleasant and strange. At the apartment building where they lived in the city all he heard when he awoke was the noise of traffic.

As light increased in the room Mark raised up on his elbow and looked at Sharon. Curled up, her face turned to the wall, she lay hugging her pillow, sleeping soundly.

Soon Mark heard someone moving about in the house. It must be his father. He had always gotten up with the sun.

His dad hadn't changed much, Mark thought. Except maybe for the better. He seemed more content and relaxed. So did his mother. What

had he expected to find? he asked himself. Of course he was happy to see the family so well off. But it was a surprise. Four years ago he had left home as though fleeing a pestilence. He could still remember painfully the time his father had disputed with a neighbor over a boundary line and made a fool of himself before the whole community. And he remembered the worry about money and how during high school he had had to wear patched, ill-fitting clothes.

Why, Mark wondered, hadn't his mother in one of her few, short letters told him about the improvements they had made in the place? She had written him that Harlan was getting married and that both he and his wife were working. But nothing more. Of course the improvements had been made only recently. The lawn and shrubs had been put in and the painting done in early spring. But when she wrote him three weeks ago she could have mentioned it. But all she had said was, yes, they would be very happy to have him and Sharon come visit. Had she not said anything because it would sound like bragging? Or had she known it would hurt him to be told what his brother had done?

Mark raised himself on his elbow and looked through the opening between the curtains. Outside it was almost full daylight. Then he heard noises from the kitchen. The sounds were muted and fragmentary like those people make when trying to be quiet. The family were up and getting ready for breakfast, but they didn't want to wake him and Sharon. Harlan and Paula would be going to work at seven.

Mark got up quietly and dressed; he would let Sharon sleep.

He carefully closed the bedroom door and went into the kitchen. His father, Harlan, and Paula were just sitting down at the table and his mother was scooping eggs from the skillet onto their plates.

"We thought you'd be sleeping a while yet," his mother said. "You were so tired last night." She went back to the stove and broke two more eggs into the skillet.

"Sharon not getting up?" Harlan asked.

"She was really beat last night," Mark said, sitting down at the table. "Thought I ought to let her sleep."

"She did seem a little addled," Harlan said. "She probably didn't know what to think of all of us."

"She's not used to families. Never really had one of her own. Her dad just went off and left her and her mom. Sharon was only about eight. Then when she was in high school her mom died."

"Poor thing," Paula said. "No wonder she was shy with us. But she seems like a real sweet girl."

"She'll be all right when she gets to know everybody," Mark said.

"Sure she will," Paula said. "She was all right last night. Just a little shy, that's all."

Mark poured cream into the cup of coffee Mrs. Armstead had set before him. He didn't think of Sharon as being shy, exactly. But maybe she did appear that way to other people.

Mark stirred his coffee and turned to Harlan. "How long have you and Paula been working at the knitting mill?"

"Since it opened." Harlan thought a moment. "That was in November. 'Bout a year and a half now."

"How's the pay?" Mark asked, trying to sound more casual than he felt.

"Pretty good. Since the three new mills opened in Ettrick, wages have gone up everywhere. There are plenty of jobs."

"Glad to hear industry's coming in," Mark said. But he felt rebuked. He glanced around the kitchen that seemed so much more comfortable and cheerful than he had remembered it. There was a new range and the walls were freshly painted. His younger brother and his wife had changed things. They had not run away.

"But Paula won't be working much longer," Harlan said. He smiled and reached over to pat her swollen stomach. Paula's large brown eyes looked up at him proudly. Even pregnant, she was fresh and pretty in the morning. Dark and full-breasted, she looked almost exotic. Mark watched her closely as she looked at Harlan. If she had had time and money to spend on her appearance she might have been beautiful.

Mark picked up his fork and took a bite of one of the fried eggs Mrs. Armstead had ladled onto his plate. Harlan has done better than I have, he thought. A pretty wife who understands him. Soon be a father. He glanced at Harlan and his father eating breakfast. They were so natural together. All four of them — his parents, Paula and Harlan — were so unselfconsciously at home with one another. He could never again be that close to them.

"When is the baby expected?" he asked.

"In August." As he stood up, Harlan looked affectionately at his wife. "We'd better get going," he said.

Mark noticed how tall Harlan had grown. He was lean and muscular and his face was hard and angular; the face of a man with strength and courage. A better man than I am, Mark thought. Physically and morally better.

"See you after work," Harlan said. "Maybe we can go around and see some old friends."

"You bet," Mark said. But he had no desire to see anyone.

Harlan picked up the big metal lunchbox that Mrs. Armstead had packed for them. He and Paula went through the livingroom and out the front door.

"Well, I'd better go do the feeding and milking," Mr. Armstead said.

"I'll help." Mark stood up to accompany his father to the barn.

"You don't need to. There ain't much to do. We don't keep but a couple of cows anymore."

"I'd like to come along."

Outside, the sun was red through the tree tops behind the house; dew weighed down the grass in the backyard. Mark pulled the clean, chilly air into his lungs. Again he felt nervous and excited. It was as though he was finding a lost part of himself. He looked out toward the orchard where the apple and pear trees were in pink and snowy blossom. He wanted to be taken back into this place, to be in harmony with his father as Harlan was, not to be separated by what he had done.

At the barn Mr. Armstead scooped a bucket of bran from the barrel in the feed room and went to one of the cow stables. As the cow ate, he started to milk. The white streams hissed and rang on the bottom of the metal bucket.

"I'll milk the other one," Mark said.

Mr. Armstead looked up, his pale blue eyes vivid in his wrinkled, weathered face, his scalp showing through his thin, short gray hair. His eyes examined Mark, as though seeing him for the first time. "You sure you remember how?"

"Oh sure," Mark said. He took the other pail and a bucket of bran to the next cow stall. He was awkward and the cow was restive under his clumsy hands.

After a few minutes his father finished milking and came to the stall door. "How you doin'?" he asked.

"Okay," Mark said bravely. He pulled more vigorously to try to make the milk hiss out in steady streams the way his father did. But in his clumsiness he pinched the cow's udder and she jerked and kicked; her right foot caught the brim of the milk pail and turned it over. The foamy milk seeped into the dingy straw.

"You'd better let me finish," Mr. Armstead said. Mark stood awkwardly aside, his face redder than his hair, while his father quickly and skillfully took what milk remained.

Walking back to the house empty-handed, Mark felt foolish. He was afraid to offer to carry one of the pails of milk.

In the kitchen Sharon was eating the egg and bacon Mrs. Armstead had fried for her. Mark sat down across from her. "Sleep good?" he asked.

"She sure don't eat much," Mrs. Armstead said. She brought two cups of coffee to the table; she and Mr. Armstead sat down. "No wonder she's so little."

Mark saw Sharon give her an appraising, scornful look, as if to say, "You're no one to be talking about anybody's appearance." But his mother, sipping her coffee, didn't notice.

"City girls like to stay thin," he said, trying to sound light and casual. He looked at his mother; she had grown heavier; the flesh sagged on her upper arms. She used to be thin herself, especially during the years when she was often sick. And her hair, Mark noticed, was beginning to gray. But Sharon had no right to look at her the way she had. His mother was only being friendly.

"When do you have to be back at work?" Mr. Armstead asked slowly. It seemed an effort for him. Talking casually was something he didn't often do.

"Not till the end of May. I saved a week of my vacation from last year."

"We're only going to stay here until Monday," Sharon said. "Then we're going to drive on to Florida."

"Neither of us have ever been down there," Mark explained. Although they had talked of going to Florida, he felt that Sharon had insulted his parents, suggested that she didn't want to stay with them. "Ought to be nice down there this time of year," he went on. "Not too hot yet."

"Yes, that'll be nice," Mrs. Armstead said. "You knew that my brother Frank lived in Tampa for a while, didn't you?"

"Well, I'd better get started," Mr. Armstead said. He took the last sip of his coffee and stood up.

"Where are you going?" Mark asked.

"Got to do some plowing. The big field over along the creek. Get it ready to plant some corn."

"Can I help?"

"No, I'll just be riding the tractor. Nothing for you to do."

"You just rest," Mrs. Armstead said. "It's your vacation." She reached for Mr. Armstead's coffee cup. "You don't need to help with the dishes either," she said to Sharon. She rose and took the coffee cups to the sink.

"Things here at home sure look good." Mark glanced at the freshly-painted yellow walls and at the shiny electric range.

Mrs. Armstead looked around the kitchen. "Harlan and Paula bought the new stove when they got married and moved in."

"When did you have the outside painted and the new roof put on?"

As she washed dishes, Mrs. Armstead commented quietly but proudly on the various improvements they had made in the house and the farm. She seemed pleased and even self-important about having guests in the house. But soon she changed the subject and asked Mark and Sharon about their apartment in the city and about their jobs. Mark told her about his duties in the newspaper office, some of them still menial, but he was working his way up, and about the courses he had been taking in night school. Sharon explained her secretarial work in the insurance office.

Mrs. Armstead put the last plate in the glass-doored cabinet above the counter. "I'd better get the beds made," she said. She left the kitchen and went down the hall to the back bedrooms.

Mark stood up and looked out the window over the sink. "Let's go outside," he said to Sharon. "I'll show you around the farm."

"That sounds exciting."

"You don't have to be sarcastic about everything."

Sharon sipped her coffee. "All right," she said after a moment. "Let me go in and put on some other clothes. I suppose a skirt isn't appropriate for walking on the farm."

A breeze was blowing out of the northwest, down from the mountains; Sharon hugged her sweater about her. Her sneakers and tan jeans contrasted with Mark's city-looking pants, shoes, and sport shirt. They went down past the small barn. Mark remembered it as being dilapidated, but new boards had replaced the falling, rotten ones; even under the recent coat of dull red paint, the repairs showed clearly. Beyond the barn they stopped at the fence and looked at the two reddish-tan cows and calves.

"Those are the cows we milked," Mark said. "And those are their calves."

"Yes," Sharon said, "I know what cows and calves look like."

Mark went on, "Dad will kill the calves for beef next fall. I used to help him. He'd shoot the calf in the head with the 22 rifle and we'd hoist it on the limb of the oak tree to butcher it." He pointed up the hill to the big oak beside the barn. The covering of young translucent leaves was like lime frosting in the morning sunlight.

"Did you like to do that?" Sharon looked at him as though she was seeing something new.

Mark gazed out across the bushes in the pasture below them. "The killing really bothered me. I had to hold the chain to keep the cow's head still while Dad shot. I looked away until he had cut its throat. After it was dead I didn't mind."

"I can see why you wanted to leave this place," Sharon said.

Mark held apart the two top strands of barbed wire for Sharon; then he bent and stepped through after her. They walked down the grassy hill toward the thick bushes that lined the spring run.

"One time," Mark said, "when I was pretty little, I was holding a young bull for Dad and he made a bad shot, a little to one side of the head. The bull didn't go down. It took off running. I tried to hold it, but it dragged me along on the chain." He stopped and pointed back behind them. "It ran along the fence up there. Then finally it stopped and stood with its legs spread out stiff, shuddering all over, and foam and blood stringing from its mouth. Dad came running up and shot it again."

"My God," Sharon said. "Growing up here must have been awful."

Mark walked on. "You have to kill animals for food. There's nothing wrong with that. You eat meat, don't you?"

"But to make a little kid do it."

"He had to have someone to help. It wasn't that horrible. Didn't do me any harm."

"It's just so primitive. This whole place is primitive. So lonely. No other houses in sight. What did you do with yourself out here?"

Mark thought a moment. It was dismal at times. Especially in winter. But there were good things too. Sometimes he was in an exalted mood when autumn colors flamed on the hills or when spring green painted the countryside.

"I wasn't really unhappy here. It's lonely, but it's peaceful." Mark looked around him. "Don't you think it's pretty here?" he asked his wife. He pointed to a hillside beyond the pasture where dogwood blossom floated like clouds in the greenness. "I still miss this place." He gazed toward where the mountains made a hazy blue bank on the horizon.

"There's no sense being sentimental," Sharon said. "There's nothing here for you."

"You don't understand. I can't just forget. It's part of me. I shouldn't have left."

"You wish you'd stayed here and never met me, I suppose."

"No, I don't mean that. I just mean I lost something."

"I know you sometimes wish you weren't married," Sharon said. "You wish you were free so you could come back down here and be a good old farm boy.

"Or get one of those good jobs at the knitting mill," she added sarcastically. "Why anyone would want to come back to this God-forsaken place I'll never understand."

"That's right," Mark said. "You don't want to. You don't want me to think about anything but you. You resent my even talking about my family."

"That's not so."

Mark stayed silent. He knew that it sometimes was so. But he thought he understood. It was her fear of being left alone again. When he had met her, she had been so lonely and miserable living with her aunt and working in the office. She still had difficulty talking about her parents. Maybe deep down she feared that he would leave her as her father had left her mother.

"When I talk about this place," he explained, "it doesn't mean that I don't like the life we have. It's just that this is part of my life too. I don't want to come back here to live."

But sometimes, he had to admit, he didn't like the life they had, living in an apartment building in a crowded noisy neighborhood, going out to movies in the evenings for entertainment. Sometimes during the long days in the newspaper office, as he helped to write headlines or prepare layout, he longed for the country he had grown up in. He saw the wheat fields rippling in the wind and heard the babble of the creek through the rocks where he and Harlan used to swim. He smelt the curing hay on the summer air on hot afternoons and felt the roughness of corn husks on his palm as they harvested on a frosty October morning.

And sometimes, although he loved her and wouldn't want to be without her, this girl he had married seemed strange to him, with her quick clipped speech and the words that he had once thought only men used. He knew that underneath she was not hard, but she could sound that way. He couldn't imagine his mother or Paula saying, or even thinking, the things she sometimes said — her goddamns and bastards and screws and

sonofabitches. And, yet, Sharon was his life too, a part of him as much as this place he had fled.

They walked on silently across the pasture and a broad field covered with gray wheat stubble. Then they went through a patch of woods and into a plowed field on a hillside that sloped to a creek bordered by bushes. Across on the opposite hill Mr. Armstead was plowing. Around the gray-green field was a wide border of shining red earth. When Mr. Armstead turned at the corner and was facing them, Mark waved. Mr. Armstead tentatively raised his arm, as though he felt silly having a young man and woman watching him as he plowed.

Mark and Sharon walked down across the field toward the creek. The earth was no longer moist and gleaming like that on the opposite side, but dried to irregular streaks and splotches of dull pink and red. He must have broken this field two or three days ago, Mark thought. When would he plant the corn? Mark was ashamed that he didn't remember the times for planting.

When they came to the bottom of the field Mark found an opening in the bushes and stepped through to the creek.

"Harlan and I used to swim here."

"It doesn't look deep enough to swim."

"Well, we splashed around at least. Got cooled off and clean after working in the fields.

"It used to be deeper though," he added. "The dam was twice that high." He pointed to the low, thick wall of rocks that damned the creek and created a little waterfall. "See how much higher it is on the other

side. The rain has washed in sand and filled the bottom. We used to dive from this bank. Harlan and I hauled all these rocks out of the fields and stacked them here."

"You must have been industrious boys," Sharon said in her flat, ironic voice.

"Hey," Mark said, "let's go swimming. You want to take a swim?"

"No thanks. Doesn't look very inviting. Besides, its too cold."

"The sun's getting warm now."

"I didn't bring my bathing-suit. Don't know how that slipped my mind."

"Don't let that stop you," Mark smiled. "We never wore any."

"Real nature boys, weren't you?"

They walked on along the edge of the field and followed the creek into the woods. Under the tall oaks and maples it was cool again. A gray squirrel scampered through the leaves and up an oak to its nest high in the limbs. After a while they sat down to rest with their backs against a big oak. Above them the new leaves were gold-green against the clear sky. The sound of the creek came faintly up the hillside.

"It's pleasant here in the woods," Sharon said.

"Yeah," Mark agreed. "This is pretty country, isn't it?"

"But I don't think I could stay in the country long. It's too quiet. It's kind of scary."

"I don't see anything scary about it." He picked up a piece of rotten limb and threw it down the hill. It shattered against a tree.

After a minute Sharon spoke: "What was it you said your old man did that made you leave?"

"I call him my dad," Mark said.

"What was it?" Sharon repeated.

Mark stared down through the trees for a moment. "He had been having an argument with our neighbor, Jack McClemen, about where the boundary line was between the farms. Finally McClemen got a surveyor over there." He pointed vaguely off toward the field where his father was plowing. "The surveyor said McClemen was right. Dad thought they were cheating him out of some land." Mark paused, picked up a small dead limb and twisted the bark from one end.

"Well?" Sharon said. "Go on."

"When the surveyor was there McClemen had put some metal stakes in along the new boundary -- or the boundary, anyhow. Then late one night when we were all asleep, Dad went out and started moving the stakes to where he thought they ought to be. The sound must have woke McClemen. He came out where Dad was. He said that when he tried to stop Dad, Dad came at him with the axe he was driving the stakes with."

"Well, what happened?"

"He just got out of Dad's way and went back home and called the Sheriff. Next morning the Sheriff came out and made Dad move the stakes back. McClemen decided not to swear out a warrant; so nothing happened. But word got around and it was a kind of joke. I remember guys on the school bus making remarks. Like, "Hey, Armstead, your dad's farm gotten any bigger lately?"

"That's why you left?"

"No, not just that. I was thinking of leaving anyway as soon as I finished high school. Mainly because we were poor then."

"They aren't exactly rolling in luxury now."

"It was a lot worse. There had been some bad years for the crops. Too wet or too dry. And Mom had been sick a lot. Dad still had a mortgage on the farm. Except for what Mom canned we didn't have food sometimes."

"Well," Sharon said, "what else could you do? You had to leave and try to better yourself."

Mark stared at the ground between his knees and twisted bark from the dead limb.

"There's no reason to feel guilty. What the hell did they expect you to do?"

"I'm not worried about what they expected." He threw the limb off into the trees.

"Well, there's no use brooding. They're all right now. I don't see why you've become so sentimental. You didn't like this hillbilly life, so you left. Why try to make it sound wonderful now?"

"You just won't try to understand, will you?"

"Oh, I know, it's part of you," Sharon mimicked. "This red dirt, as you once said, is in your blood. Tough luck."

Mark stood up suddenly and stalked off through the trees.

They came out of the woods into the red field and continued along the creek. The tractor stood silent on the opposite hill. Sharon was almost running, trying to keep up, stumbling along in the rough, cloddy ground.

They came alongside the pond and Mark stepped through the bushes and stared into the murky water. "Let's go swimming," he said.

"It's too cool, Mark."

He began taking off his shirt.

"Mark, what's wrong with you?"

"I just want to swim. And I want you to swim with me." He took off his shoes and socks.

When he had on nothing but his shorts he started toward her. "Come on," he said, "get your clothes off. I want you to go in with me."

Sharon backed away a few steps. "Mark, you're crazy." But he caught her and pushed the sweater off her shoulders and began unbuttoning her blouse.

"Mark, somebody might see us. Your old man might come back."

"No, he's eating lunch. You're just chicken."

"Oh hell, all right," Sharon said. "A little skinny-dipping might be fun."

Mark waited while she undressed. "Come on," he said impatiently. They climbed down the bank and into the water.

"My God, it is cold!" Sharon exclaimed. "I'm not going under."

"Oh yes you are." He laughed and splashed the cold water on her.

"Ow! no!" Sharon started for the bank. But he caught her and pushed her down in the knee-deep water.

"Good God, Mark. It's freezing!"

Mark shoved her head under and then sat down in the water with her. "Doesn't this feel good?" he laughed nervously. "Nothing like a dip in the old swimming hole, huh?"

Sharon's teeth chattered. "It's wonderful, you crazy bastard. But I've had enough. All right if I get out?"

"Sure," Mark said. "I just didn't want you to leave the old home place until you'd had a dip in the old swimmin' hole."

He followed her thin, pale back up the bank to where their clothes were draped over the bushes. Before Sharon could step into her panties he seized her wrists. "Let's go out in the field."

"The field? What for?" He pulled her along the path between the bushes. "Don't, Mark. Your dad might come back. Mark!"

He pulled her a few yards into the field. "Sit down," he said.

"In the dirt?"

Mark made her sit down and dropped to his knees beside her. Then he pushed her backward onto the cloddy ground, scooped up a handful of the red dirt and rubbed it on her chest, smeared it on the wet skin.

"Mark, stop. That hurts. Damn, Mark!"

"How do you like this red dirt?" Mark muttered between his teeth. He shoved Sharon's hands aside, forced them to the ground above her head and held them with his right hand. With his left he continued to smear the red dirt on her breasts, stomach, and thighs.

Sharon kicked and twisted. "Oh Jesus," she cried, almost laughing, almost sobbing. "You're crazy, Mark. You've lost your goddamn mind."

Mark hesitated and let the handful of dirt slip between his fingers to the ground. He released Sharon's hands and looked away from her and out across the creek toward the opposite hillside. Sharon sat up and began absently to brush the red dirt from her skin. After a moment Mark

stood, reached for her hand and helped her to her feet. Silently they went back to the creek, waded into the pond and washed the red dirt from their bodies.

Still silent and not looking at each other, they climbed the bank to where their clothes were draped over the bushes. As they dressed Mark glanced at Sharon's face, trying to determine what she was thinking. He was surprised and awed by what had happened and he believed that she felt the same. Her expression was serious, puzzled. But what could he say? He wasn't going to apologize. And he didn't want to try to explain it to her. She had to understand it for herself. He wasn't sure he could explain it, anyway. It was just beginning to be clear to him.

Sharon tied her sneakers, stood up and dried her hair with her sweater. Then they walked up the red hillside, through the patch of woods, and out into the field of gray wheat stubble.

As they crossed the field, Sharon paused again to dry her hair with her sweater.

The silence seemed so profound that Mark was fearful of breaking it. "About dry?" he asked quietly.

"I'm really going to look great today. Thanks to you." Mark knew that she was trying to regain her old bantering tone, but her voice was subdued. "Your parents are going to think we're a couple of nuts."

"I guess I was a little crazy," Mark said.

Sharon looked at him, and he saw a faint, wondering smile flicker on her lips. "I guess so," she said.

"I don't know what made me do that," he said, and watched for her reaction.

"I think you do. And I think I know. It's hard to explain. But I think I see why you did it."

In her voice Mark heard a gentleness and confidence he had never heard there before, and when she looked at him her eyes were compassionate. Yes, he thought, she knows.

They had come to the pasture fence and he held apart the strands of barbed wire for her. They went up the grassy hillside toward the house.

On Monday afternoon Mark sat on the bed and watched Sharon take her lingerie and blouses from a drawer and put them in her suitcase. The late sun, coming in the side window, dusted gold across the oak floor and onto the green bedspread.

Sharon hesitated for a moment and looked up from the suitcase on the bed. "Are you sure you want to go on to Florida in the morning? We can just stay here. Really, Mark. I don't mind."

Mark looked at her calmly and a faint smile moved on his lips. "I'm ready to go. We've had a long enough visit." He thought for a moment. "They aren't bitter toward me. They don't even seem to remember. Anyway, there's nothing I can do about it now."

Sharon sat down beside him on the bed. "They're rather proud of you. Going off on your own like you did."

Mark was pleased. "They really are glad to have us here. We'll have to try to get down for a few days every summer. And maybe even at Christmas sometime."

"That will be nice," Sharon said.

Mark looked up at her; their eyes met. Suddenly they both laughed self-consciously at how well they understood each other.